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CIA

Can you keep a secret?

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Beneath the continuing uproar concerning the Central Intelligence Agency and its abuses of power lies a fundamental and difficult question: how shall a secret intelligence organisation, which needs confidentiality to be effective, operate within the context of an open, democratic society that, for reasons of recent domestic political crises, is reluctant to trust very much to the hands of the president and his executive branch? The question had a new test, which it did not really need, in the recent revelation by the press that the CIA was planning an infusion of $6m in aid to the non-communist political parties in Italy. Outraged members of Congress and the public felt they were catching the agency at its old dirty tricks, and the agency (supported by the White House and Mr Henry Kissinger, the secretary of state) feared it would ultimately be prevented by the disclosure from acting discreetly in the national interest in this and other instances.

Congress for decades looked the other way while the intelligence agency went about its business, dirty or otherwise. In some cases, such as the long secret war in Laos, Congress specifically voted the funds for operations that were concealed from the public. But it has, in the post-Watergate period, become self-conscious about asserting its authority over this and other dark areas of government behaviour. In 1974 it passed a law requiring that the appropriate officials inform six separate congressional subcommittees about any covert actions being undertaken by the CIA beyond its ordinary intelligence-gathering functions. Under that requirement, the Ford Administration went to Capitol Hill last autumn to say that it was aiding the anti-communist factions in Angola with an estimated $50m worth of arms and, more recently, to give notice of its plans to revive a traditional, if confidential, post-war American role in Italy.

What happened from there is very much of the order of mutual self-fulfilling prophecy. As far as outspoken opposition congressmen are concerned, this is all proof of the Administration's intentions to go off on adventures of its own, guided only by the particular world view and diabolical schemes of Mr Kissinger. Details of the CIA actions, leaked to the press, have provided all the proof that the agency needs for its view that Congress simply cannot be trusted with such information. (Though Congressman Michael Harrington got himself into deep trouble with his colleagues back in 1974 for being careless with details of past covert American involvement in Chile, the congressional art of leaking such information has since been substantially refined; it is an easy matter to accomplish, and there is little peril to the congressman's reputation or manoeuvrability in the process.) Once the feelings of recrimination are established, it is an easy step for the CIA to begin intimating that the climate of distrust encouraged by Congress is to blame, in part, for the recent murder of the agency's station chief in Athens, Mr Richard Welch.

That is going further than most reasonable commentators are prepared to go. Even Counter spy, the left-wing Washington magazine that published Mr Welch's name and those of other CIA people after they had already been published overseas, cannot realistically be held to account for the shooting. The names of CIA station chiefs in foreign capitals are scarcely concealed and widely known; Mr Welch lived in the same house as several of his predecessors and has already been replaced by another man publicly linked to the intelligence agency.

Colby can't trust Congress

One way out of the problem is to establish a new, and more genuine, system of congressional oversight of the intelligence community—a major goal of the House and Senate committees that are concluding their investigations of the CIA, FBI and related agencies of government. The proposal now gathering support would set up a committee on each side of the Capitol, with rotating membership and no other responsibilities beyond supervising intelligence activities. Some would include in the ground rules of any such new committee stiff penalties for unauthorised disclosure of information by its members, perhaps even fines or expulsion from Congress.

Agreement on these issues between Capitol Hill and the White House—where Mr Gerald Ford's own proposals for reform and restructuring are in the works—will not be easy to reach. Many members of both the House and the Senate are in a mood to demand a consultative role for Congress in the early planning stages of any covert CIA actions. But that, says the Administration, would usurp the legitimate authority of the executive branch. It may have to compromise, however, in order to get out of the present situation, in which members of Congress in effect wield a potential veto power over CIA activities through the threat of disclosure.

Why not get the United States out of covert actions altogether and make initiatives like those in Angola and Italy matters of public debate and open knowledge? Impossible, says Mr William Colby, the outgoing director of Central Intelligence: the rules of the international game do not permit such things. "The kinds of activities that big nations need to conduct in the complicated and difficult world that we face" must be done in secret. And if the United States does not do them, they will be left to others "who are tough and mean enough".